

VZCZCXYZ0016
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSK #1236/01 2841142
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 111142Z OCT 05
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3138
INFO RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS 3391
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3169
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 1435
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 3055
RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KIEV 2947
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0701
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 001236

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KIEV FOR USAID
DEPT ALSO FOR INR/B

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/04/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: Who is Alexander Milinkevich?

REF: MINSK 1205

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 B & D.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus nominated physics professor, former deputy mayor of Grodno and NGO activist Alexander Milinkevich to run in the 2006 presidential elections against current president Aleksandr Lukashenko. A cultured, quiet man with Western exposure, a network of NGO supporters in the regions and few political party ties, Milinkevich is a relatively new face among Belarusian opposition politicians. In light of the unpopularity of all political parties among most Belarusians, Milinkevich's candidacy may give him an advantage against Lukashenko. But he will need to overcome the fear many conservative Belarusians might have that he is a nationalist, pro-western radical who will only worsen relations with Russia. Questions remain as to whether Milinkevich has the political smarts, courage and charisma to reach out to the Belarusian people and to present a solid challenge to Lukashenko on a very unequal playing field. End Summary.

Educational and Professional Background

¶2. (C) On October 2, the Congress of Democratic Forces narrowly chose Alexander MiliHQd NGO Ratusha, which was closed by the GOB in 2003 but continues to operate. During the last presidential election, Milinkevich served as campaign manager for Syamyon Domash, a position for which he routinely received criticism due to his heavy handed and ineffective management style. From 1990-1996, he was the deputy mayor of the Grodno City Executive Committee in charge of culture, education, health care, sports, youth affairs and international relations, but left the post before the 1996 referendum that amended the constitution to give Lukashenko more power. Born on July 25, 1947, in the Grodno region of Belarus, Alexander Milinkevich graduated from the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of the Grodno Teachers' Training Institute and holds a doctoral candidate's degree in physics and mathematics. Milinkevich has written 65 scientific works, mostly in quantum electronics and laser technologies. He speaks five foreign languages, including Belarusian, Russian, English, Polish and French.

What Is He Really Like?

13. (C) Milinkevich is a quite, calm man who works best in small groups, and needs practice in front of large audiences. After the congress, some delegates said he would be a good president in a normal democracy, but lacks the fire to successfully challenge Lukashenko. Milinkevich lacks public speaking proficiency as evidenced by his weak and unenthusiastic speech at the opposition congress. He is deeply interested in familiarizing Belarusians with their pre-Soviet history as evidenced during his tenure as the deputy mayor of Grodno where he promoted many cultural and restoration programs. He is deeply interested in the history of the region and often gives Emboffs historical tours of Grodno. During his campaign speech, he said his outlook was influenced by the fact that his grandfather was jailed by Polish authorities for advocating the use of Belarusian in schools.

Strong Western Ties and Exposure

14. (C) Milinkevich privately credits the U.S. with saving his life. Milinkevich suffers from kidney problems and in early 2005 needed to have an operation in Warsaw. Not having the money to pay for the procedure, Milinkevich approached Post to ask for assistance and Post was able to fund the operation via the U.S. NGO IRI. The operation was a success and Milinkevich expressed his gratitude to the U.S. for saving his life.

15. (SBU) Milinkevich has had significant exposure to the West. In 1994, while he was on the Grodno City Executive Committee, he traveled to various states in the U.S., including Oklahoma, to participate in the USIS sponsored International Visitor Single Country Project entitled, "City Administration in the U.S." While head of the NGO Ratusha in 1998, Milinkevich participated in a three week U.S. sponsored Community Connection Program for NGO leaders at the University of California - Fresno. In 2000, Milinkevich attended the Senior Executive Seminar on transnational security concerns at The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. He has also studied state development issues and economics at European institutions, including the University of Montpellier in France. Milinkevich has long been Post's main contact in Grodno and western Belarus.

Political Pluses and Problems

16. (U) Acting largely outside the party system, Milinkevich is supported by a network of civil society groups that he built up while working at various NGO resource centers. Milinkevich enjoyed strong support from the younger participants in the congress. His many contacts will help the opposition reach out to the mass population during the election campaign, which is something the political parties thus far have been reluctant to do.

17. (U) Despite trying to remain independent of the parties, Milinkevich has not been able to separate himself entirely from the unpopular connotations associated with the main party that supports him, the Belarusian National Front (BNF). Lukashenko - and other potential presidential contenders from the opposition - could use Milinkevich's nomination by the BNF to label him as a radical nationalist, thus alienating pro-Russian voters. Milinkevich has tried to reach out to these voters, but they are furthered alienated by Milinkevich's insistence that Belarus join Europe, thereby implying Belarus faces a choice between Russia and Europe. Milinkevich stresses, however, that there is no need to choose; Belarus can be a

part of Europe as Russia should be as well [more detail on Milinkevich's platform in septel].

Comment

18. (SBU) Milinkevich's nomination puts a relatively new face at the head of the Belarusian political opposition. As a man whose strength comes from the regions not Minsk, Milinkevich will need to show tact and skill to keep the Minsk based opposition forces and leaders behind him. Some of those leaders still feel hurt by Milinkevich's success in narrowly winning the contest. Some even accused him of not playing by the rules set by the parties. But the real test for Milinkevich is not whether he can win over the opposition but whether he has the political skill, courage and charisma to reach out to the mass of Belarusians who remain highly ambivalent about the opposition. In light of regime efforts to inhibit the opposition from communicating with the people, Milinkevich will need energy, organization, resources and courage to make himself known to the people. He will also need to develop and hone a message that will appeal to the Belarusian public. Milinkevich brings with him a network of young and energized NGO supporters, some leadership experience from his time as deputy mayor of Grodno, and a clean political slate relatively free of party associations. But he will need a strong and daring campaign strategy to challenge the Lukashenko regime on what will be very unequal playing field.

KROL

Other info you may wish to draw from for the bio paras:

Born on July 25, 1947 in Grodno, Belarus, Alexander Milinkevich graduated from the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of the Grodno Teachers' Training Institute and holds a doctoral candidate's degree in physics and mathematics. He served as a researcher with the Physics Institute ((ch speaks five foreign languages and wrote 65 scientific works, mostly in quantum electronics and laser technologies.

From 1990-1996, he was the deputy head of the Grodno City Executive Committee in charge of culture, education, health care, sports, youth affairs and international relations, but left the post before the 1996 referendum that amended the constitution. In 1996-1997, Milinkevich represented the Belarusian Soros Foundation in Grodno. From 1996 until it was closed down in 2003, Milinkevich chaired the Grodno-based NGO Ratusha. Milinkevich served as campaign manager for Syamyon Domash in the 2001 presidential election. In 2002, he served as the chairman of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers.